

Revisiting the Traditional Virtues of the Hero: A Phenomenological Study of Wilfred Owen's Disabled Soldier

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The Literary Entity within a Narrated World

Thanks to critics like Roman Ingarden and Wolfgang Iser, we treat the literary object as a phenomenon actualized and then maintained in being through the reader's effort in realizing the poem, that is, only through irony, paradox, metaphor, metonymy, and other aesthetic techniques that perform the text as a portrayed world. Real external entities, such as a disabled war victim, attain to a poetic existence, such as Wilfred Owen's mutilated soldier in the poem "Disabled," by virtue of this aesthetic effort, fulfilled each time literary comprehension is felt to have reached beyond a previous inadequate degree of realization.

The reader's effort, however, cannot lie outside his lived-world (in the Husserlian sense of the *lebenswelt*). Any literary enlargement of meaning is primarily registered in terms of alterations to the reader's background knowledge, which cannot therefore be excluded from the process of original meaning. One recurring point in this study will be that the *lebenswelt* is preserved and accessed as a *narrated* world, composed out of mythical, religious, literary, historical and other shorter narratives, say, fables and parables – the unfolding nature of which has long provided us with predictable roles. Even less desirable narratives such as TV commercials continue to narrate our world, providing its entities with conceivable sequences of events, accustomed roles, and stereotyped culminations. The reader is born into this world of articulated challenges, responses, and destinies, all of which precede his literary interpretation with familiar patterns of behaviour and expected outcomes. Each and every unfamiliar experience is thus first engaged within a familiar narrative, which is activated at the same instant that it is modified to accommodate the new experience. Iser approaches such a notion of prescribed phenomena when defining the world as composed of systems that stabilize certain expectations while deactivating certain possibilities, thereby reducing a contingent reality into a predictable frame of reference.¹ For Iser, literature neither copies nor discards the world's systemic nature, but infiltrates and then complements its inadequate articulation by activating its neutralized possibilities: "the text must [...] implicitly contain the basic framework of the [world's] system," he says, but this happens only in order that literary devices enable us to "reconstruct whatever was concealed or ignored by the philosophy or ideology of the day."² Thus, it can never be said that normative assumptions do not play a significant part in transforming the reader's narrated world. Penetrating and modifying their familiar structure (or paradigm) is the very process whereby literary objects emerge as original and significant articulations.

Ingarden had earlier stressed the self-sufficient reality of the literary work, whose phenomena are simply correlates of corresponding sentences (for instance, a problem is the correlate of a question rather than an independent, external entity). But for Ingarden, too, the reader must realize the various stages of the aesthetically constructed object "under the aspect of the image of the world which he has constructed for himself in the course of his life."³ Owen's poem "Disabled" exemplifies this interplay of the familiar and the unfamiliar through its subtle interweaving of the narrated world of the hero and a war victim. Owen's disabled soldier is understood only in the process of transforming the narrative texture of heroic virtue already in place. In Heideggerian and Gadamerian terms, the hero has come down to us in the form of linguistic preservation, which has sedimented his virtues and made this foreknowledge available to further linguistic mediums that continue to unravel and weave further on its inherited tapestry. Heidegger, in particular, enlightens us with an approach that is simultaneously a destruction and reconstruction of phenomena embedded in language, a process which may degenerate into idle talk (or simplified assumptions) as well as rise to the status of a revelation about Being.

¹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 71.

² Iser 72-3.

³ Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973) 58.

There are different linguistic mediums of preservation, just as there are of innovation. Mythical and historical texts purport to retrieve phenomena in their original state, though to different ends and degrees. Poetry, on the other hand, functions as a deliberately transformative and inferential engagement with traditional phenomena. The poem “Disabled” exemplifies what is characteristic of most poetry: it contains aesthetic devices merging within a highly condensed structure, and projecting their composite object through a close interaction of perspectives. This contrasts with the generally successive stages of realization encountered in other literary forms, such as the novel. The closing lines of Owen’s poem may provide an initial example. Here, the narrator’s voice (which narrates in the third person) blends with the disabled soldier’s inner bitterness of tone, which protests against the cold and against not having been put to bed, a piteous appeal that at the same time reverses the heroic virtue of mental and physical fortitude:

How cold and late it is! Why don’t they come
And put him into bed? Why don’t they come?

This ambiguous attribution of voice allows a glimpse into the soldier’s inner distress while assuming a detached narrative of his broken spirit by a separate narrator. The personal, detached, pathetic, and narrative shifts of this voice testify to the fact that Owen’s disabled soldier is poetically realized by multiple conflicting viewpoints, ultimately capable of inserting an ironic reversal of heroic virtue (that is, a despairing voice) into a seemingly uninvolved narrative. Once revealed as an unstable complex of irreconcilable elements, the aesthetic object becomes the very endeavour to negotiate the widening distances between its disparate and mutually questioning components. It henceforth endures as a constructive effort to connect viewpoints, reconcile emerging differences, and negotiate blank spaces, in a bid to keep its overall configuration intact. This poetic demand for reconstruction also sets in motion a wider conflict between the aesthetic object as an evolving construct and the narrated world of the hero as a previously established realm of archetypes predetermining the reader’s response. The poetic experience thus reactivates the reader’s constructive faculties within a narrated world of the hero which is evoked through ironic discrepancy. For even as the inner conflicts of the aesthetic object are resolved into a new configuration, new distances start to emerge between this novel configuration and the pre-established constructs of the heroic world.

As will be argued in the second part of this study, new depths of insight are achieved within the evolving phenomenon of the disabled soldier through its predominant schema of ironic reversal, that is, its recurring inversion of the familiar paradigm of the hero and thus its primary mode of merging with the narrated world of heroism. Other mutually questioning perspectives within Owen’s disabled soldier find their meaningful place within this evolving pattern of irony, whose configuration creates an alternative impression of depth and reality in a world of flat stereotypes. The qualitative performance of this poetically constructed reality replaces the quantitative force with which traditional narratives have long established phenomena like the hero as real and immutable entities. If the reader cannot stand outside his narrated world of the hero, the poetic experience at least provides him with some significant options as to the way (insightful, interrogative, liberating, distorting) he might profitably stand within it, thereby generating the unfamiliar within the boundaries of the familiar. The poetic experience demands of the reader what Hans-Georg Gadamer says of tradition in general: “To be situated within a tradition does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible.”⁴ All the interpreter needs is a tactful, strategic way of belonging to the “continuing effect of the tradition in which he himself has his historical reality.”⁵

Owen’s Disabled Soldier as an Aesthetically Unfolding Entity

In realizing a tenable correlation between the disparate components of the disabled soldier, irony suggests itself as the pattern of aesthetic response that will sustain the aesthetic object through an alternative mode of combination. The third stanza of the poem “Disabled” will serve to illustrate how this *modus operandi* of irony can be extended to other poetic elements, which are made significant within its evolving pattern. Here, two contrasting images of drawn blood emerge. First, in order of reading, comes the image of “the hot race / And leap of purple” blood “spurred” from the soldier’s thigh and “poured ... down shell-holes.” Then there is the soldier’s flashback to the image of “a bloodsmear” down his leg, endured as a mark of athletic prowess at a

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989) 361.

⁵ Gadamer 359. Gadamer is not speaking of a literary reader, but of the general understanding of tradition by any “historically effected consciousness” that engages it in the form of a dialogue. Nevertheless, his observation includes the literary reader as one example of this “historically effected consciousness.”

game prior to the war, an occasion he now recollects only as a war victim. The bloodsmear of an athletic hero is, therefore, exploded into a wartime scene of mutilation and bloodshed even before it is poetically conveyed. The whole relevant piece reads:

He's lost his colour very far from here,
Poured it down shell-holes till the veins ran dry,
And half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race
And leap of purple spurted from his thigh.
One time he liked a bloodsmear down his leg,
After the matches, carried shoulder-high.

Apart from constructing the aesthetic object, irony here infiltrates and loosens the conventional structure of the athletic hero, bringing the unrealized possibilities of this heroic paradigm to light. For instance, besides the glaring disproportion of bloodshed between the trivial "bloodsmear" of a sports event and the hyperbolic pouring of blood "down shell-holes till the veins ran dry," there is also the antithesis between the local crowd that cheers the athletic hero and the desolate scene of war "far from here." There is, furthermore, the contrast between the implicitly flushed complexion of the athletic hero and his having "lost his colour" in war (which is also, of course, a metonymy for the soldier's loss of blood). Finally, there is the obvious antithesis in terms of height between the experience of being "carried shoulder-high" and the humbled state of lying wounded in a shell-hole. The overall schema of irony is thus corroborated at the very instant when these additional contrasts are validated by its postulated predominance in the poem. But also, in combining the disparate components of the war victim, irony starts to mediate between the archaic structure of the hero and the deviant configuration of the war victim, becoming a distinct performance due to its contrastive paradigm within the larger narrated world of the hero. If the bloodsmear down the athlete's thigh evokes the traditional initiation rite of the hero, the ironic amplification of this bloodsmear into the bloodshed of the Western Front, where the true ordeal of mutilation replaces the mere ritual of bloodletting, realizes a novel way of belonging to this evoked world of heroism.

Let us recall that in ancient ritual the hero's symbolic death is customarily reversed by resurrection, unless substituted with an animal's sacrificial blood. In "Disabled," on the other hand, the pouring of blood "down shell-holes" neither wholly sacrifices nor allows any ritualistic substitution for the disabled soldier: it denotes an extreme mutilation depriving him of both active life and death, and thus of the possibility of resurrection, deification, and immortality – the usual course of events in ancient myth. The ritualistic bloodshed traditionally providing the hero with a passage through death and back to a revered life is thus inverted: an actual bloodletting that confines the protagonist to an anonymous life within an institute, a life that is essentially dead. Articulating a war victim through such inversions of ancient ritual can be accomplished, however, only because the past ritual of bloodletting has long prepared the ground for its reversal. There is both a long mythical and religious history of the hero's deification through mutilation, and a long-standing scholarly examination of it. Suffice it to mention Lewis Richard Farnell's *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality*, which at one point examines the ancient practice of "paying posthumous worship to the human being that had been offered to the deity in sacrifice."⁶ Whether this sacrifice then involves periodic revival as in the mythical figure of Persephone, or the dismemberment of a hero partly consumed and then rejoined by the gods themselves as in Pelops (son of Tantalus), or the sacramental sacrifice of an animal (such as the lamb) offered and consumed as a surrogate of the resurrected hero, these ancient rituals of bloodshed have long prescribed the path through death to revered immortality. In Owen's disabled soldier, however, vestiges of this Dionysiac rebirth themselves remain torn to pieces; the components of the myth of eternal renewal remain scattered, and start to suggest a powerful reversal: mutilation as death in life, a perpetual dismemberment of heroic elements experienced by the disabled soldier.

In "To a Comrade in Flanders," a poem Owen wrote prior to his first experience of combat, soldiers envisage themselves as godlike, for their death is not a "sevrance" from loved ones, but a cause of "rev'rance."⁷ Moreover, the "rough knees of boys shall ache" in adoration upon the death of these soldiers, who in their living voice also assert that "girls' breasts are the clear white Acropole / Where our own mothers' tears shall heal us whole." This envisaged rebirth through the ultimate sacrifice (blending the archaic notion of resurrection with the loving and immortalizing memory of the living) illustrates the mythical paradigm that must have governed some of Owen's presuppositions about war, and that would eventually be ironically reformulated after his first experience of combat. In another untitled poem of the same period, Owen mingles a

⁶ Lewis Richard Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (London: Oxford UP, 1921) 18.

⁷ Jon Stallworthy, *Wilfred Owen* (London: Oxford UP, 1974) 140.

wartime fatality with an evocation of myth, whose archaic power of sacred suggestion already appears to have dwindled. Thus, the poet witnesses a “Smile, / Faint as a wan, worn myth, / [...] On a boy’s murdered mouth.”⁸ By interweaving the alluring beauty of the smile, its oneness with a “murdered mouth,” and the resemblance between this hybrid countenance and a pale, exhausted myth, Owen subordinates myth to the actual decay of war, and yet allows a vestige of mythical beauty or glory in the alluring smile. Such examples point the way to the subtler vestiges of myth incorporated into the play of irony in the poem “Disabled.”

The phenomenon of the soldier in this poem is, in fact, a literary object sustained in being through significant accretions to this ironic schema, the initial field of poetic comprehension within which other poetic features gain their aesthetic validity. For instance, the reader now accustomed to the ironic reversal of heroic virtues will notice that “the hot race / And leap of purple” referring to the soldier’s blood “poured [...] down shell-holes” actually employs athletic terms (that is, “race” and “leap”) robbed from the immediately following athletic scene. In contrast to being a defining quality of the athletic hero, the agile qualities of racing and leaping are here metonymically transferred to the opposing outcome of physical deterioration (“half his lifetime lapsed in the hot race / And leap of purple spurted from his thigh”). This poignant relocation of athletic terms within the opposing image of mutilation illustrates how the components of the narrated world of the hero are never actually lost in poetic modes such as irony, a device that evokes similarities as much as it juxtaposes incongruences between athletic hero and war victim. The narrated world of the hero remains, therefore, a cognitive prerequisite that is revived at the same instant that it is questioned, corrected, and remoulded by the ironic unfolding of the disabled soldier. As an interpretative performance of a war victim, irony must constantly include traditional heroic traits as material for differentiation. The ironic image, in other words, is derived as much as it is created, for the ironically unfolding phenomenon still mobilizes the causes and stimuli of ancient heroic narratives, albeit towards a different end. This is why the literary experience entails an artistic mediation between the reader’s construction of a new entity and the dominant figures of a narrated world.

Reader-response critics like Ingarden and Iser speak of literature in terms of insightful accretions to our lived-world, whose total dismantling would amount to having no horizon of understanding. Ingarden, for instance, speaks of the aesthetically unfolding entity as an object that appears not “to belong to our life,” yet “enriches it in an unsuspected way and gives it a new, often very deep, meaning.”⁹ Iser, for his part, speaks of a prevailing repertoire of social, cultural, and literary norms, which is corrected by the actual event of literary comprehension that accesses it. The repertoire serves as the indispensable background whose correction puts in relief new literary insights emerging against it. “In this way,” he points out, “traditional schemata are rearranged to communicate a new picture.”¹⁰ One such traditional schema responsible for a major preconception about the Great War itself was, in fact, that of a game. Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, observes that the feeling of a sporting spirit just prior to the start of hostilities made the initial perception of the Great War similar to a sporting contest, even to the extent of judging the progress of the war in terms of the competitive spirit expected to be displayed in a game of football.¹¹ More importantly, Fussell’s underlying thesis is that certain events of the war became memorable in their literary portrayal due, not to their scale of horror, but to *their embodiment of the ironic discrepancy between such preceding paradigms of how the war should be successfully conducted and the later actual disasters or disillusionings of trench warfare.*¹² Since the discrepancy between preceding formulas of bravado and shocking devastation was realistically lived

⁸ Stallworthy 141. That Owen never abandoned this strong mythopoeic inclination, even after combat, is evident in both his poetry and his letters. His draft of the unfinished poem “The Wrestlers,” which deals with the mythical combat between Heracles and Antaeas, was written during his recovery in Craiglockhart. Stallworthy 195-7. In *Heroes’ Twilight: A Study of the Literature of the Great War* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965) 131-2, Bernard Bergonzi quotes a letter written by Owen to Osbert Sitwell in 1918, which exemplifies the poet’s ironic re-enactment of religious ritual, vividly recounting details of the passion of Christ as relived by the men under his command. Bergonzi, for whom the “retreat [from actuality] into myth” diminished the authenticity and realism of some of the war poems, still admits that “It is the sense of the war as a ritual sacrifice, in which he was involved as both priest and victim, that gives Owen’s finest poems their particular quality, far transcending the simple protest and rebellion of Sassoon (or some of his own less ambitious pieces).” Bergonzi 67, 132.

⁹ Ingarden 188.

¹⁰ Iser 80.

¹¹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York and London: Oxford UP, 1975) 25-7. So dominant was this preconception of war as a game that one assault on the German trenches started by kicking balls towards their line, and attempting to dribble them the rest of the way. In actual action, as by convention, war was taken to be a game.

¹² Fussell 31-2.

by soldiers at the Western Front, it seems natural that irony should become the preferred cognitive mode for representing trench warfare. Irony allows preconceived heroism and unexpected horror to mingle in its cognitive process of inserting differences amid similarities. Owen's disabled soldier *is a hero in this aesthetically qualified sense*: his heroism is to endure and embody this ironic equation generated by the war itself, namely, the mingling of mythical expectations with human fragility, initiation with mutilation.

If near immortality and superhuman strength continue to prescribe the classical paradigm of heroic virtues, as embodied in Achilles and Hercules, later literatures only resort to this orthodox paradigm through their own progressive application of heroic ordeals. The play on words constantly employed in Joyce's *Ulysses* exemplifies the way modern literature loosens the fixed platitudes of the narrated world of heroism and yet expands our everyday world, such as a modern day in Dublin, to heroic and mythical proportions that somehow remain effective. The modern literary hero has thus emerged out of a transformative interaction with mythically prescribed virtues, and in many cases this has led to refined adaptations of long-standing heroic attributes. For instance, being the novel's or the poem's protagonist, regardless of outcome, has become a modern adaptation of the challenges of the classical hero in many literary minds, but only because our daily preoccupations have convincingly adopted the proportions of dramatic ordeals faced by earlier heroic types. Morton W. Bloomfield argues that if the word "hero" has become a synonym for protagonist in literature and literary criticism, it still "often carries with it a penumbra, if not more, of its earlier meaning of a superior human being."¹³ This penumbra of superiority can be variously remoulded and applied. It can incorporate the seemingly trivial chores of everyday life, or it can involve a whole new religious outlook as its heroic quest. Bernard F. Huppé, for instance, observes that in Medieval literature "the imagination of an audience brought up on heroic poetry" of an earlier heathen type was remoulded by Christian writers intent on forging a whole new paradigm of Christian heroism out of it.¹⁴ Even the epic poem *Beowulf*, Huppé points out, is a transformative engagement with a pre-existent heroic language, aiming to show the limits of its heathen ways while remoulding its virtues into the new sensibility of a Christian hero.¹⁵

In his book *The Literature of War: Five Studies in Heroic Virtue*, Andrew Rutherford analyses five heroic types that constitute a continuum along which each later type betrays a subtle development or sophistication upon the preceding. Rutherford's book is expedient for this phenomenological study of Owen's soldier, for his evolving types suggest a heroic tradition that constantly assimilates subtle modifications, thereby extending the boundaries of its familiar realm along its historical evolution. Rudyard Kipling's hero, for instance, no longer simply promotes imperial civilization in foreign lands of supposedly inferior moral and civil qualities – the quest of an earlier heroic formula. Rather, Kipling's protagonist adopts the heroic stance of the common soldier maintaining "courage, endurance, loyalty, friendship, honour, [and a] sense of duty" under a dubious authority, cold-blooded and inhuman.¹⁶ And Kipling's obedient hero is himself superseded by Thomas Edward Lawrence's (Lawrence of Arabia's) intellectual type of hero, who combines this readiness for action with the "sensitive, scholarly, self-analytical and self-tormenting" qualities of the questioning self.¹⁷ The combination of these two virtues – action and reflection – take the new heroic paradigm a step beyond Kipling's merely obedient soldier. Lawrence's heroic type now questions the wisdom of the action he still carries out, in an anguished consciousness that must combine the analysis and the execution of war, and that can criticize a previously unquestioned authority. In effect, Rutherford's five types show the hero prevailing through a progressive refinement of his increasingly complex consciousness, which steadily becomes his most interesting aspect, usurping even the predominance of heroic action itself. They illustrate the *eidos* of the hero maintained through ever more sophisticated variants of his self-conscious becoming, a heroic identity sustained through revisions that, as relevant responses to its inherited structure, accrue to its understanding.

¹³ Morton W. Bloomfield, "The Problem of the Hero in the Later Medieval Period," *Concepts of the Hero in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, eds. Norman T. Burns and Christopher J. Reagan (New York: U of New York P, 1975) 28. Bloomfield adds the following: "The fact that a word originally meaning a semi-divine creature has come, in one of its senses, to mean the protagonist in literature, does not tell us a good deal about how we conceived the chief personage in literary works from the seventeenth century onwards." There has developed, in fact, a proliferation of literary types of hero: "There are the epic hero, the romantic hero, the dramatic hero, the tragic hero, the ironic hero, the realistic hero, and even the comic hero and anti-hero." Bloomfield 29.

¹⁴ Bernard F. Huppé, "The Concept of the Hero in the Early Middle Ages," eds. Norman T. Burns and Christopher J. Reagan 7-8.

¹⁵ Huppé 19.

¹⁶ Andrew Rutherford, *The Literature of War: Five Studies in Heroic Virtue* (London: Macmillan P, 1978) 33.

¹⁷ Rutherford 39.

Such investigations should induce the reader to re-examine the traditional narratives themselves, and realize that such classical tragic heroes as Oedipus and Renaissance models as Hamlet are, in fact, anything but purely virtuous figures. To be sure, these last two examples still belong to Northrop Frye's high mimetic mode, a heroic type that, although fallible due to faults like self-blindness or hesitation, still surpasses ordinary men in its heroic qualities of "authority, passion, and power of expression."¹⁸ Nevertheless, Oedipus and Hamlet exemplify traditional models of the hero whose complex natures hardly evoke unquestioned admiration and imitation. Frye's five heroic modes, too, demonstrate an overall phenomenon of the hero subsisting through a wide range of phenomenological adaptations, all of which somehow continue to assert its *eidos* or essential idea. This has also supplied later literatures with more than one heroic variant as their point of departure. Literary performance thus makes us conscious of a frequently forgotten cultural factor: that the heroic *eidos* cannot be adopted as an immutable figure, or a fixed point of departure, but rather reopened as a complex of perspectives taken up at some point of cultural or literary extension.

In his book *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*, Lord Raglan distinguishes the traditional hero from the historical hero precisely on the basis of this accumulation of narratives from many ages and places. The hero of tradition is an intertextual and multicultural product, a hybrid of narrative sources joined anachronistically. The numerous versions of his life emerge from the ritualistic adaptations carried out by the different communities adopting him as their ancestor. For Lord Raglan, "the story of the hero of tradition [...] is the story of his ritual progress."¹⁹ The overwhelming vastness of this precursory heroic lore, I suggest, is grasped within a new manageable frame of interpretation afforded by the poetic event, which reopens the traditional discourse of the hero by means of an aesthetic performance carried out by the reader under literary instruction. This aesthetic performance achieves a sense of closure only through a significant level of realization or play. Poetic devices fail to exhaust traditional phenomena like the hero, but their purpose in the first place is hardly to do so. It is, rather, to enable the reader *to stand within traditional narratives with a new performative strategy*, allowing him to bracket certain clichéd aspects of the traditional phenomenon, while executing significant accretions to its less pronounced possibilities. This is how the hero can be realized through a significant becoming (or adaptation) of his precursory presentations. If tradition prescribes archaic phenomena, the reader's application of poetic devices allows his own insights and novel reintegrations to be inscribed into their significant rehearsal and presentation. This reciprocity of memory and extension compels Iser to state that the literary phenomenon "has no existence of its own," and only comes into being by an interplay of retrospection and projection,²⁰ which in our case happens through the play of irony.

The whole process can be exemplified by the way Owen's ironic schema reopens another traditional heroic virtue, namely, his reputed possession of a wisdom superior to that of other men. This platitude is, of course, already seriously questioned in such literary figures as Faust, whose intellectual superiority derives from a contract with evil, and ultimately disrupts a papal and imperial world in Marlowe's drama. Closer to our day, there is, of course, the gothic hero Victor Frankenstein, whose superior scientific faculty is quite literally embodied in a monstrous shape, a knowledge incarnated out of hideously joined limbs plundered from graveyards. Even earlier classical models are not exempt from such unwelcoming relationships between hero and superior wisdom. Consider Oedipus, who, despite his promising solution of the sphinx's riddle and his initial deliverance of Thebes, is actually constituted out of recurring instances of failed awareness: he lacks the fundamental awareness of his origins, parentage, and actual actions (that is, patricide and incest). And he also fails to interpret the surrounding portents of his wrongdoing. Oedipus's bewildering accumulation of failed perceptions makes the audience of Sophocles's drama constantly more knowledgeable of the hero's fate than he himself is. Owen's disabled soldier entails a vestige of this dramatic irony, and reopens the unresolved enigma of the hero's intellectual superiority. Somewhat like Oedipus, he displays a constant lack of perception during his recruitment, allowing the reader's comprehension of the Western Front to surpass his trivial motives for joining up, namely, looking smart and impressing his girl:

He thought he'd better join. — He wonders why.
Someone had said he'd look a god in kilts,
That's why; and maybe, too, to please his Meg,
Aye, that was it, to please the giddy jilts
He asked to join. [...]

¹⁸ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1990) 33-4.

¹⁹ Raglan, 4th Baron of (Fitzroy Richard Somerset), *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama*, reprint. (Connecticut: Greenwood P, 1975) 189.

²⁰ Iser 113.

However, classical dramatic irony is here complicated by the fact that now, while recollecting his own recruitment, the disabled soldier embodies the very tragic fate ignored by his earlier self. His recollected ignorance of tragic fate co-exists with his present awareness (and actual embodiment) of it. This is, of course, in keeping with his ironic constitution, which mingles mythical expectations with tragic fate. Evidently, the classical formula of dramatic irony is here revived with poignant adaptations required by the highly ironic phenomenon of a disabled soldier. But a subtler irony obtains in the recollected image of the recruit himself. The traditional hero, observes Lord Raglan, gains his “victory over the elements and over man” through possessing a “power [...] conferred by divine descent and the absorption of divine wisdom.”²¹ The youthful recruit, on the other hand, tries to attain to a divine status *by simply looking like* “a god in kilts” at the same instant when he ironically lacks even fundamental, let alone divine, wisdom (regarding the eventual demands of war). With an eye for this subtler irony, the reader can observe that the appearance of a god here substitutes true wisdom, rather than heralds it in accordance with ancient myth. Divine manifestation here becomes a mere outer ritual, a deification “in kilts” that replaces, rather than accompanies, a corresponding growth in awareness. The classical heroic virtue of divine wisdom is thus separated into mutually exclusive opposites: during the Great War, to look divine was to lack a true awareness of the atrocities that lay ahead. Such a negative attribute of the war hero, once again, tallies with frequent reports of the shock undergone by recruits after their first experience of combat.²² They met mutilation where they had expected mythical resurrection, glory, and deification. War poetry conveyed the distinctive ironies of the Great War through infiltrating and reworking those narrative elements of the hero that had hitherto served to predetermine the way war itself was initially defined and approached.

In his extended flashback, Owen’s soldier also recalls that he knew neither enemy nor “fears / Of fear” while joining up. As in the preceding quotation, the young recruit had been distracted from knowing these heroic essentials by the lure of outward appearance – his aspiration to military dress, behaviour, and ethos:

Germans he scarcely thought of; all their guilt,
And Austria’s, did not move him. And no fears
Of Fear came yet. He thought of jewelled hilts
For daggers in plaid socks; of smart salutes;
And care of arms; and leave; and pay arrears;
Esprit de corps; and hints for young recruits.

Traditionally, the hero is expected to overcome fear prior to embarking upon a clearly envisaged quest. Franklin D. Roosevelt’s modern dictum that “The only thing to fear is fear itself” is, in fact, pre-dated by many ancient rituals, which have long treated fear as a primal force to be reckoned with, reifying it as the physical endurance of injury during initiation rites. Owen’s recruit, however, stands oblivious to fear, due to recruiting authorities intent on obscuring this essential heroic trait. The “hints for young recruits” of the recruiting authorities suggest a deliberately misplaced emphasis on military trappings, and is a stark reminder that the instituted propaganda was merely another linguistic medium vying with the literary in a bid to infiltrate and manipulate the narrated world of the hero, if only for its own military ends. Appropriating the semiotic possibilities of the heroic narrative, war propaganda intended to promote the hollow gestures of military drill and dress over other heroic virtues whose physical and mental demands might well have been beyond the common recruit’s endurance. Nonetheless, not all essential traits of the hero could be omitted if the heroic *eidos* was to be evoked. Thus, the “*Esprit de corps*” listed as part of this misleading ritual is, in fact, a heroic trait that has received sophisticated development in the literature of the Great War, being one of the distinguished human responses to the Western Front. Rutherford points out that comradeship (another term for “*Esprit de corps*”) became a chief moral value generated by a war otherwise evoking “bitter moral condemnation.”²³ A wholly condemned war at least offered this modestly consoling possibility of reaching heroic stature by sacrificing oneself for one’s comrades.

²¹ Raglan 192.

²² This abrupt shift from a glorifying to a realistic portrayal of the soldier’s lot, brought about by real combat at the front, is starkly exemplified by Owen himself. In the space of sixteen days, Owen describes his war experience first as “perfect spirits” and then as “seventh hell,” in two letters sent to his mother one before and the other after his first combat experience. Fussell argues that this dichotomy of before and after resulted (along with other common polarizations of thought) from the instantaneous transformation of outlook exacted by the war. Fussell 81.

²³ Rutherford 70.

Once again, therefore, we see the heroic paradigm itself adopted with a veritable interplay between its derived and potential elements, its residual and emergent aspects. Owen's disabled soldier thus emerges not from a flat denial or an unquestioned adoption of heroic virtues, but from assimilated supplements, crafty shifts of emphasis, and rearranged correlations realized within the heroic paradigm itself. As the recruiting authorities demonstrate with their propaganda machine, there can be a rhetorical entry into this heroic model which plays down fear, obscures motive, and promotes trivial heroic aspects. On the other hand, there can also be a poetic infiltration activating the reader's ironic reworking of the heroic phenomenon, in a way that ultimately makes trench warfare more effectively represented. A literary phenomenon *stands out* only because of the way its poetic realization *stands within* its inherited tradition, and an ironic play with the familiar (perhaps trivialized) attributes of heroism is one such significant way of inhabiting precursory narratives. If we cannot shed tradition, or the way its prejudices have moulded our understanding, through art we can at least choose a style or method of enlarging its possibilities from within.

This productive infiltration into the dynamics of heroism is evident in yet another poignant antithesis in Owen's soldier, namely, his abrupt transition from immature looks (suggested by a face "younger than his youth") to his present mien of old age:

There was an artist silly for his face,
For it was younger than his youth, last year.
Now, he is old; his back will never brace;
[...]

This implies, of course, that the soldier's true adolescent age was never actually lived. His adolescent years were missed in the immediate leap from immature youth to an overly mature adulthood. The simple utterance "Now, he is old" makes the recruit's sudden maturity paradoxical: it is a premature arrival of old age, yet it still arrives too late to avoid his tragic disablement. In archaic heroic depictions, wisdom is a slowly acquired virtue resulting from a sequence of trials, unless it is already a precocious quality of the youthful hero or a supernaturally bestowed faculty. As Gwyn Jones puts it, "wisdom, in the formal statements of the heroic age, was an embracing quality in which were subsumed education and training in the young and a wealth of digested experience in the old, observation of events and the power to draw general conclusions from them, insight into character and the ponderables of human nature, and an unfailing awareness of the personal, social, and national [...] rights and duties, ties and acceptances, which alone made life meaningful and alone could make it good."²⁴ The sudden onset of adulthood in Owen's soldier is, on the contrary, full of conflicting interactions with this paradigm: it is an adulthood that literally takes no time; it is belated in relation to event but early in relation to age; it is an adulthood without any clear memory of the causes of its predicament ("He thought he'd better join. — He wonders why"), and thus an adulthood without experience. The disappearance of adolescence between immaturity and insubstantial maturity — both out of keeping with the victim's true age — is made still more poignant by the use of pictorial terms. The "artist silly for his face" recalls the image of the youthful recruit as a former model, an image which is then abruptly dissolved by the disabled soldier's subsequent inability even to sit upright, in the rhyming utterance "his back will never brace." The whole verse "Now, he is old; his back will never brace" triggers the customary connection between old age and physical debility, craftily conjuring the unexpected image of an aged man unable to stand firmly and straight. As such, it cleverly summons the concrete image of old age as an abrupt change from youth, intensifying the paradox of a sudden adulthood without experience. In poignant contrast to the archetypal hero accompanied by a wise old man, the young disabled soldier *incorporates* old age without its correlative experience and wisdom.

In Gadamer's terms, only because the anticipated meaning of the hero is lost, only because we lose harmony with our foreknowledge of heroic virtue, is there need for interpretation, for a renewed understanding of the heroic archetype as provoked by Owen's disabled soldier.²⁵ The ironic portrayal of the hero in "Disabled" reminds us of the Gadamerian notion that interpretation is not *reproductive* of tradition, but *constantly productive* of traditionally preserved phenomena. While it is only through traditional accounts of the hero that we can first put in relief the ironic portrayal of Owen's disabled soldier, it is the actual play of irony (irony as an aesthetic game) that provides the channel for appropriating past heroic accounts with progressive insight. Gadamer argues that "*understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition*, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated."²⁶ In the case of Owen's ironic mediation between past and present, a past heroic lore converges with an actual poetic

²⁴ Gwyn Jones, *Kings Beasts and Heroes* (London: Oxford UP, 1972) 45.

²⁵ Gadamer 294.

²⁶ Gadamer 290.

phenomenon in the process of evoking similarities and unexpected differentiations between the two. From the point of view of studies of heroism, much the same point is suggested by Lord Raglan, who observes that heroic accounts are not pure invention, “not the faculty of making something out of nothing, but that of using, in a more or less different form, material already present in the mind.”²⁷

This is, after all, how the traditional hero has absorbed mythical, ritualistic, and historical material into his complex narrative constitution. As a result of this traditional evolution, Northrop Frye is able to give us a whole typology of heroic types, which in turn refines our expectations concerning the modern literary hero. For instance, Frye’s basic distinction between the tragic hero, isolated from his society (or pantheon if he is a god), and the comic hero, incorporated into society,²⁸ helps us define Owen’s disabled soldier in terms of tragic isolation: he is isolated both in the field of battle “very far from here,” and in the institute: from boys playing in the park, from friends and crowds who had once cheered his athletic prowess, from girls whose slim waist “he will never feel again,” and even from an erstwhile “artist silly for his face.” Again, Frye’s more sophisticated distinction of the low mimetic mode of hero, who transforms tragic pity into pathos, due mostly to his “defective intelligence” and his exclusion “from a social group to which he is trying to belong,”²⁹ gives us a refined insight into the plight of Owen’s disabled soldier. He, too, evokes pathos through isolation incurred by his “defective intelligence.” What is strikingly relevant in Frye’s study is that, rather than a hero, he presents a heroic system in which different types are mutually defining, and emerge through a reciprocal highlighting of attributes within a growing heroic tradition. The contrasts and similarities between Frye’s heroic types provide highly evolved differentiations, implying that only as the reader becomes more versed in heroic nuances will he perceive and activate later ironic extensions of the heroic figure. Understanding the significant evolution of Owen’s literary phenomenon of a war victim is, thus, belonging to a heroic tradition through ever more sophisticated enrichments of its heritage.

This can be exemplified by further reference to Frye, who ultimately presents an ironic hero emerging from adjustments to the low mimetic mode. For Frye, the ironic hero separates two inseparable qualities of the tragic hero: inevitable fate and innocence. Christ, the archetype of this ironic mode, is “the perfectly innocent victim” who faces an inevitable fate.³⁰ More importantly, if this ironic hero begins in the “realism and dispassionate observation” of the low mimetic mode, it nevertheless moves back “towards myth, and dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods begin to reappear in it. Our five modes,” continues Frye, “evidently go around in a circle.”³¹ If Owen’s disabled soldier lies within the ironic mode, as my choice of ironic devices suggests, then this explains why he is constructed out of a discrepancy between inevitable fate and innocent enrolment, and why this ironic equation (fate and innocence) evokes the “dim outlines of sacrificial rituals and dying gods” in the poetic image of bloodletting, as well as in the recruit’s godlike appearance in kilts.

Frye’s evolving schema of heroic types in fact testifies to Iser’s phenomenological principle that the aesthetic object emerges from an *interplay* between a familiar schema and its correction, or a conventional model and adjustments to it. “The correction,” says Iser, “can therefore only take place through the restructuring of points of *significance* in the schemata. [...] The aesthetic object signalizes its presence through the deformations of the schemata, and the reader, in recognizing these deformations, is stimulated into giving the aesthetic object its shape.”³² But if Owen’s soldier is the result of reacting to our own previous creations and reinterpretations of the hero, thereby enabling us to articulate our immediate concerns about twentieth-century warfare through a transformative encounter with an archetypal figure, then there is a curious consequence for the literary phenomenon. This phenomenon is made perceptible *only during a discernible growth in our anticipated knowledge of it*. In other words, in literature we understand neither old nor entirely new phenomena; rather, we *discern the significant extension of our own presuppositions*. This is why the disabled soldier is neither a neutral nor an immediate phenomenon, but a growth in heroic understanding, or, as Gadamer would put it, a participation in the effective history of the hero. We understand the disabled soldier only at the instant when the tradition of the hero is becoming something more significant than it had conventionally been for us, when the archetype it evokes starts including our mediating performance of ironic reversal and differentiation because it has, in the first place, not sufficiently encompassed our apprehension of victims of the Great War.

²⁷ Raglan 208.

²⁸ Frye 35-6.

²⁹ Frye 38-9.

³⁰ Frye 42.

³¹ Frye.

³² Iser 92.

The ironic relocation of a mythical god in the mere manifestation of kilts, the coincidence of divine manifestation and innocence during the youth's enrolment, the tragic transformation of a ritualistic bloodsmear into true bloodshed, the sophisticated play on the hero's defective intelligence, and the uncanny leap from immaturity to old age all belong to the *eidos* of the hero as meaningful transformations. They are an interpretative activity of the reader that belongs not to the way the hero is, but to the way the hero might significantly become more than he has conventionally been in relation to the Western Front. This is why I maintain that in literature we experience not the actual being of traditional phenomena such as the hero, but *their significant becoming in the mediating event of reading the poem*. And the mediating discourse responsible for this significant becoming, that is, the mythical and ritualistic inferences and ironies indicated above, are none other than the open-ended but regulated performance of poetry.

In terms of Husserlian phenomenology, the reader of poetry first puts aside seemingly realistic assumptions about the hero, which is the reduction of the natural attitude (the *epoché*); then he reduces the phenomenon of the hero to its essential idea or *eidos*, which is the eidetic reduction, lying beyond that of the natural attitude. This second reduction simplifies the phenomenon into an essential notion of heroism, but does so only in readiness for the assimilation of new perspectives and applications. It is this eidetic reduction that provokes an inquiring re-entry into the dynamics of the hero, where ironic reversals and shifts of emphasis start to dissolve its more rigid parts and to stress new areas of integration. The phenomenological reduction of the hero can be compared to Heidegger's notion of public talk, the inauthentic and conventional mode of articulating a phenomenon that maintains it as a daily function in a pragmatic and immediate world. This public talk is responsible for our shared preconceptions about what a hero should be. But the literary reader is hardly ever after this common understanding, and often reads poetry as an event, that is, an experience whose outcome cannot be known in its entirety in advance. For him, the poetic experience starts where the prejudice of idle talk is brought up short, because its pragmatic and communal uses fail to satisfy his recognition that a tremendous occurrence, such as the Great War, has surpassed most of his conventional methods of depiction. This is where historical event and poetic event coincide: they both demand that our understanding be re-actualized through a new interpretative encounter with tradition.

Against this approach to Owen's poem, there is, of course, the claim that the Western Front was too unprecedented and overwhelming an affair to be conveyed through an artful mediation of heroic myth and legend. In the next section, I will take up this issue of the war as a harsh external reality demanding poetic immediacy to historical situation, rather than a mediated heroism.

The Poem's Reference to an External Occasion

Owen was killed while the German army was on retreat, a mere few days before the Armistice on 11 November. On this latter momentous date, a telegram received by his father and mother announced his death, presumably amid the triumphant ringing of bells.³³ As tragic and ironic in itself as any compelling piece of war literature might be, this biographical detail epitomizes a war whose daily reversals of fate and unending ironies outnumbered those recorded by its artistic portrayal. The war's gargantuan, though largely pointless, sacrifice of limb and life (a crucial thematic element in "Disabled") is uncannily embodied in the poet's own untimely death.

The poem "Disabled" itself draws constant attention to those outrageous practices and occurrences of the Great War whose cynical and ironic potential was simply greater than anything produced by literary imagination alone. One exemplary case is incorporated in Owen's representation of the deliberate enrolment of recruits younger than the required age (that is, nineteen), a blatant practice conveyed with matching levity in the poet's respective verses:

[...]
He asked to join. He didn't have to beg;
Smiling they wrote his lie: aged nineteen years.

The tacit knowledge of the recruiting authorities – whose "smiling" features betray both arrogance and illicit gain – is a well-known fact. John Purkis cites the typical account of one recruit who, upon giving away his true age ("sixteen years and seven months"), was brazenly asked by the recruiting sergeant to return on the next day,

³³ Stallworthy 286.

when perhaps he might turn nineteen.³⁴ The death of boy soldiers as young as fourteen in the trenches, together with such cases as the sentencing to death of Herbert Burden, aged seventeen, for desertion, provoked indignant protests even in parliament at the time, yet to little avail. The enrolment of underage recruits remained rampant, and was aggravated when recruiting sergeants, desperate to fill the dwindling ranks at the front, resorted to accosting and harassing young men in public, even where the latter protested they had not yet reached the required age. Such irregular measures would seem to define the ironic perversion of heroic virtue as an integral, and thus non-literary, aspect of wartime practices, with the risk that artistic mediation might then seem superfluous and dispensable. Fussell, in fact, calls the Great War a “war where irony was a staple,”³⁵ and argues that the predominance of irony in modern understanding originated “largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War.”³⁶ To many, the war in itself must have seemed an event too atrociously aberrant and viciously bizarre to be in any way enhanced or bettered by artistic sensibility. To hold such a view is, of course, to argue that the enduring appeal of war poetry resides simply in its having candidly recorded an unprecedented degree of suffering in an unrivalled moment of human history.

There is, in fact, ample proof of the realistic derivation of several of the poetic images in “Disabled.” Likewise, there can be little doubt that various other poems by Owen – amongst which “The Sentry” is perhaps outstanding in this regard – originated from singular wartime events he literally played a leading role in. That Owen does not abstract from the particulars of trench warfare, that he does not easily shift his attention from a real local trauma to some idle generalization of military conflict, and that his focus on minute details results from the lasting impact of their true occurrence on his wartime sensibility: these qualities characterize much of his best poetry. In “Disabled,” the portrayal of permanent mental and physical scars borne by the war victim is fraught with subtle linguistic and aesthetic features that evidently abridge Owen’s own first-hand experience in Craiglockhart War Hospital, in Edinburgh. Consider the following lines from the last stanza, in which poetic devices seem so subservient to the poet’s own historical experience:

Now, he will spend a few sick years in institutes,
And do what things the rules consider wise,
And take whatever pity they may dole.

Owen’s relocation from a Casualty Clearing Station to Craiglockhart, as a victim of shell shock (considered at the time a euphemism for nervous breakdown),³⁷ may well have prompted the grammatical and poetic features employed here. For instance, the slow process of relocation all the way to Craiglockhart seems to stand behind his grammatical choice of plural nouns in “a few sick years in institutes,” with the obvious understatement “few.” Furthermore, the disciplined regime which would have prevailed somewhat at Craiglockhart can be speculated as the cause behind Owen’s choice of “rules” as the impersonal agent running the institute with “wise” decisions. This metonymic shift from human management to dehumanized “rules” gains a special proximity to Owen’s wartime experience when one considers he wrote these lines while recovering at the war hospital.³⁸ Finally, in the last quoted line, what is rationed out in small quantities (due suggestively to its short supply) is “pity.” This metonymic shift from rationed food, the customary object of “dole,” to rationed pity once again testifies to Owen’s immediate outlook on the war hospital, conceivably sparing in its compassion due to its more essential need of clinical efficiency.

Concurrent with this personal involvement in historical events was another motivation towards realistic portrayal: that of countering the false image of war implanted in the civilian mind. The war poet’s willingness to give first-hand accounts of trench warfare was, in fact, constantly fuelled by his need to correct the romanticized picture of it produced by the instituted propaganda, a picture often taken in by an unsuspecting civilian population. The distorted image of conditions at the Western Front provided by the contemporary press, as well as the use of poetry itself to arouse the patriotic sentiment,³⁹ would have further provoked the war poet’s resolve to adhere to lurid individual details in order both to respond to false public convictions and to remedy the impersonal generalization of the conflict. It is not to be denied, either, that the sufferings, the large-scale

³⁴ John Purkis, *A Preface to Wilfred Owen* (London and New York: Longman, 1999) 45.

³⁵ Fussell 16. Consider, also, the observation that “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends.” Fussell 7.

³⁶ Fussell 35.

³⁷ Purkis 27, 36.

³⁸ Stallworthy 223-6. Owen showed the first draft of “Disabled” to Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves at Craiglockhart.

³⁹ Purkis 65-6.

disasters, and the minor triumphs peculiar to each battlefield held their own distinctive appeal for direct graphic depiction. The captivating individuality of each battlefield can be clearly demonstrated by the remote (and thus exceptionally illustrative) case of the theatre of war depicted in Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. This epic account, Rutherford points out, is not a stylized anachronism intended to romanticize the desert war. It is rather the result of a truly lived type of twentieth-century warfare that produced a matching style of literature. Lawrence's Arabian adventure necessarily has a more epic quality than literature depicting the Western Front since "the exotic setting, the blend of the primitive and civilised in Bedouin life, the acknowledged status of great [Arab] warriors [...], the willing endurance of arduous conditions," and other lingering classical and medieval traits were realistic elements of the "picturesque, adventurous quality of this desert war."⁴⁰ Likewise, the singular setting of each battlefield at the Western Front, including its unprecedented conditions and unequalled disasters, held their own special appeal for realistic portrayal.

While it cannot be denied that war poetry has this strong referential element, readers still productively responding to it testify to anything but a referential whole. Some light can be shed on this paradox by Iser's argument that literature *provides the reader with instructions for building a situation*, rather than with the external situation itself, ready-made and complete. The reader can bring "his own faculties into play"⁴¹ only because the literary state of affairs, built as it is from instructions implemented during the act of reading, is *an aesthetically unfolding situation*. The literary situation is thereby "depragmatized," the loss of its "familiar surroundings" releasing its "hitherto unseen possibilities."⁴² This occurs to such an extent that its object can never henceforth be equated either with the reader's own initial disposition, or with the text itself, or, for that matter, with any single one of its constituent perspectives. Rather, the literary object is maintained by the very interaction between text and reader, and along accumulating perspectives which it continually transcends as their overall product. One might add that Iser's aesthetically unfolding object constantly progresses towards a new cognitive event: a resumed intensity of contrasting viewpoints; a deeper scrutiny of marginalized aspects; an extended association of ideas; or a refined judgement. Iser would simply define these cognitive events as higher-order *gestalts*, that is, successive configurations each of which gains its apparent fullness only in relation to the comparative failure of some preceding assumption of wholeness. If literary reference obtains only during such transitions between earlier and later *gestalts*, then any initial similarity to an external object gives way to the latter's unforeseeable becoming, a process that yields the object as an innovative experience while revealing the conditions of its composition. The literary field of execution becomes the object's active frame of reference, and any habitual response to it predetermined by the real world is replaced by what Steven Mailloux sums up as the temporal process of reading: "making and revising judgments, solving mysteries and puzzles, experiencing attitudes, taking on and rejecting perspectives, discovering sequential structures of similarity and contrast, formulating questions and answers, making and correcting mistakes."⁴³ The literary object can never be identified with its external reality precisely because its cumulative experience "tells us something [more] about reality."⁴⁴

The mechanical functioning of our institutionalized systems and daily routines makes the pragmatic composition of everyday objects both automatic and economical. Aesthetic accomplishment, on the other hand, demands "aesthetically relevant features" that, while filling in the successive concretizations of an "aesthetically receptive attitude,"⁴⁵ prolong and complicate the object's literary mode of becoming. It follows that any external object evoked by the literary text is recognized (that is, cognized anew) through the intervening experience of aesthetic composition, which supplements the prevalent system of reality with a *cumulative recollection of the object*. To be sure, in "Disabled," both the cultural conventions of the hero and the historical context of the war victim, however transformed by the operative field of irony, are in themselves more complex than the pragmatic composition of everyday objects. As such, they make extensive provision for their ironic reversal. Nonetheless, when the poem's ironic schema makes incompatible what is traditionally associated (hero-god) and compatible what is customarily distanced (hero-disability), the transformative power of its cumulative recollection becomes manifest.

⁴⁰ Rutherford 47.

⁴¹ Iser 108.

⁴² Iser 184.

⁴³ Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1982) 70-1. As do most other reader-response critics, Mailloux applies his observations to narrative texts rather than poetry. Nevertheless, his sequential model of reading serves to explain why the poetic object and situation are cumulative.

⁴⁴ Iser 54.

⁴⁵ Ingarden 48.

Further insight into this notion of a cumulative recollection can be gained by focusing on its underlying concept of experience. Fundamentally, experience is the ability to master any unfolding situation through the adaptive growth of one's past knowledge, thereby grasping the unknown through a corresponding extension of the known. The essential quality of the experienced person, observes Gadamer, is the very ability to be open to a novel experience "made possible by experience itself."⁴⁶ In the poem "Disabled," the ironic novelty of the war victim is made possible by the reader's prior experience of heroic virtue, which is confronted, relativized, and polemicized in the process. The Great War, too, proved an outstanding historical experience through the extent to which it modified hitherto accepted notions of doing battle. Its historical significance lies primarily in the momentous scale to which it reworked previous experiences of warfare. Whether literary or historical, significant events are first registered through an adaptive growth in one's foreknowledge, which acts as the primary evidence of their newly unfolding situation. While this process invariably results in transforming one's narrated world, the extent to which this takes place is nonetheless determined by the different spheres of operation in which the unfolding novelty is accomplished. Whereas an increased military efficiency may prove to be an acceptable accomplishment for the historically unfolding situation of modern warfare, only those literary factors optimizing "the aesthetic 'impression' "⁴⁷ can lead to an aesthetic fulfilment. Determined as it is by the range of operations demarcating and identifying the sphere of performance itself, our foreknowledge is subject to varying standards of transformation.

Owen's disabled soldier is therefore sustained both through a modification of the inadequate models (or foreknowledge) of the hero, and through a constant effort to reach his aesthetic synthesis in a poetically adequate manner. Ironic distance from precursory models prevents heroic traits from simply falling into their familiar paradigm. This is made evident when the recruitment of Owen's soldier turns out to be a hollow deification, his initiation an eventual disability (or death in life), his sudden maturity paradoxically destitute of all experience. Such contrasts with traditional heroic configurations make room for the alternative and more problematic state of affairs unfolding through the act of reading the poem "Disabled." This entails the ironic progression of interwoven opposites: divine manifestation and human fragility, initiation into life and disability for life, extreme innocence and premature old age, artistic beauty and revolting mutilation, cheering crowds and secluded hospitalization. Such an evolving play of contrasts, however, only insinuates its self-regulating schema of irony, its alternative performance and adequacy, into the hero's evoked tradition, thereby restoring the quality of a significant experience to the hidden potentialities of the heroic archetype. It is thus that the evoked archetype can speak to us again, as a memory endowed with an unexpected range of operations.

Gadamer constantly alludes to this reciprocity between memory and novelty as the essential dynamics of all experience. While memory explains "the lasting meaning that an experience has for a person who has it," the other contrastive, yet equally essential, quality of experience is the "definite immediacy" through which it "eludes every opinion about its meaning."⁴⁸ These two elements merge in the inexhaustible nature of a meaningful experience: a memorable acquaintance that is yet unfolding beyond its accepted opinions, being able to enlighten us anew through the latest contexts and applications in which its memorable aspect is revitalized. Experience thus grasps the unfolding uniqueness of life that in turn heightens and extends its initial sphere of acquaintance. In reading "Disabled," this same reciprocity of memory and extension is made evident when the immediacy of the poetic performance, while eluding accepted opinions about the hero, nonetheless retrieves *possibilities long embedded within the progressive history of the heroic phenomenon*. In the preceding sections, the aesthetically reworked notions of ritual mutilation, divine manifestation, and celebrated athleticism have clearly demonstrated that, rather than discarded, potentialities intrinsic to the mythical hero are recalled and relived through their aesthetic admixture with human weakness and disability. Constructed well in advance of war poetry, the mythical identity of the hero has long contained such implicit possibilities of becoming. Consider the age-old mutilation-resurrection motif, which is not a fixed archaic structure, but rather an inbuilt potential of the hero for metamorphosis between human fragility and divine status. This metamorphosis can be worked in both directions: either towards an ultimate apotheosis of the hero, or towards his nemesis (a thwarting of his hubristic presumption of equalling the gods). Husserl's notion that the "*intending-beyond-itself*" of the consciousness of something is "an essential moment of it," or "a 'meaning

⁴⁶ Gadamer 355.

⁴⁷ Ingarden 182.

⁴⁸ Gadamer 66-7. In his discussion of the concept of *erlebniskunst*, originally meaning "that art comes from experience and is an expression of experience," Gadamer shows how this concept was "then used for art that is intended to be aesthetically experienced"; this prompts him to argue that "the significance of that whose being consists in expressing an experience cannot be grasped except through an experience." Gadamer 70. It is this supplementary experience of poetic realization that restores eventfulness to textual, cultural, and institutional phenomena derived from the reader's narrated world.

more' of the Same,"⁴⁹ is a crucial insight into this notion of engaging tradition as a preserved capability for more meaning. It indicates how the heroic phenomenon already contains possibilities of becoming that an aesthetically adequate engagement can both disclose and activate.

The poetic unfolding of Owen's war victim reawakens the latent dynamics of the mythical hero to a performative degree that accommodates the novel ironies of the Great War. In the process, the war's historically concluded event enters a familiar play of heroic possibilities now subject to an aesthetic mode of execution and projection. The extraliterary event thus acquires the two essential elements of experience: it moves backwards, towards a naturalizing memory, and forwards, towards an ironic performance able to accommodate the absurdities and paradoxes of the Great War through its self-regulating novelty. The whole process ensures the significant becoming of the extraliterary event, whose primary assignment to memory subsequently expands with relevancies generated between aesthetic configurations. The only further significance to be gained by this aesthetically unfolding situation is through further productive responses to its earlier poetic syntheses, a meaningful becoming of what the reader has formulated up to a previous point of aesthetic performance. The end of performance (whether in dramatic play, match, dance, poetry, or any other field) is not a final structure, but the outstanding realization of a pre-established plot, set of rules, choreography, or archetype. However consummate the individual performance, its sense of completion lies in restoring the immediacy of the act to the memory of the game, that is, in reasserting the identity of the game by excelling all its previous realizations. Likewise, the context of modern warfare in "Disabled" is not captured by a fixed heroic structure, such as the commonplace of physical ability and fortitude, but through a continued realization of endured opposites (deification and fragility, ritual and true bloodletting, beauty and mutilation, and so on) whose resumed play with heroic potentialities continues to articulate an otherwise irrational war.

The fact that the war itself was predetermined by various cultural and narrative texts of armed conflict facilitates this aesthetic appropriation of the conflict. So powerful were the antecedent narratives of conflict in 1914 that they proved responsible for the obsolete mode of doing battle applied at the Western Front. "There are," Fussell remarks insightfully, "conventions and styles in Orders of the Day just as for any literary documents."⁵⁰ Only against the background of such outmoded articulations of war could the new trench warfare be foregrounded as a distinctly ironic way of doing battle, with its own specific demands on human endurance and fortitude. Accordingly, it is not only Owen's reader who comes to poetry with preconceptions of heroic virtue; but humanity at large that embarks upon actual war governed by instructive myths and archetypes (primary amongst which stands the heroic archetype itself). Here, too, a historical event merits being called of epical proportions, or unprecedented in its dramatic consequences, because it redraws the boundaries of the myths and archetypes that naïvely introduce it. By reopening the traditional discourse of the hero, the poem "Disabled" already, in a very essential way, reveals the revisable myths of war itself. For if the traditional hero's fundamental activity is that he must do battle, this heroic activity is as open to significant reconstruction as is the hero himself. One critic illustrates the point by observing that from the ancient hero's virtue of doing battle there emerges the later Christian hero who does spiritual battle with his own conscience, thereby revising the very notion of violent conflict into a self-questioning consciousness.⁵¹ In "Disabled" the hero's inner conflict between mythical and human dimensions can be seen as one such possible extension of this revisable narrative of conflict itself.

That the Great War was especially prone to revisable mythical and legendary narratives is an extensively recorded fact, and attests to the force of cultural texts even in overwhelming historical events. Fussell gives a detailed account of how this war was particularly mythologized, calling it a "myth-ridden world" articulated in terms of the ancient rituals of resurrection and metamorphosis.⁵² It was also a war fictionalized by legend and fable, inhabited by widely acknowledged ghosts, and believed to have been partly carried out by ancestral warriors. One outstanding example is the myth of the angels of Mons, ancient English bowmen believed to have risen to defend the British during their retreat from this location – a myth that originated from a short story, entitled "The Bowmen," published by the journalist Arthur Machen on 29 September 1914.⁵³ Even though

⁴⁹ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht, Boston, and London: Kluwer Academic P, 1999) 46.

⁵⁰ Fussell 17.

⁵¹ Huppé observes how the literary task undertaken by early medieval Christian poets was to weave the heathen heroic virtue of doing battle with the Christian doctrine of *imitatio Christi*, the resultant hybrid being the notion of a soldierly striving for Christian virtues such as compassion. The new Christian hero emerging out of this dialectic with the old heathen hero was a moral requirement of the time. Huppé 8-10.

⁵² Fussell 114-5.

⁵³ Bergonzi 35.

Bernard Bergonzi speaks of the Great War as an ultimately demythologizing experience, he still recounts this and other such instances of mythmaking to illustrate the “mythopoeic imagination of the public” at the time, a mentality that in the case of the angels of Mons would reject even the journalist’s own “energetic assertion that his story was pure invention.”⁵⁴ “In one sense,” observes Fussell, “the movement [of the war] was towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial, the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant. In short, towards fiction.”⁵⁵ This demanded of war poetry a constant negotiation between evoked myth and actual horror. And where myth failed to fill the role of recollection, other literary conventions stepped in. When the poet William Noel Hodgson blended the Georgian convention of a red sunset with the actual redness of bloodshed in one of his poems, comments Fussell, he exemplified how war poetry typically “caught [literary conventions] in the act of turning literal.”⁵⁶ By negotiating the distance threatening to grow between traditional models of representation and the unprecedented atrocities of modern conflict, war poetry could thus articulate an immediate context already considerably dependent on literary precedents and ancient ritual. Unable to shed the literary and mythical conventions governing its unforeseeable development, the actuality of war demanded an intervening aesthetic performance to recapture their hidden potentialities and proceed meaningfully beyond their accepted structures.

This function of the literary experience as a mediation between retention and protension is, of course, Iser’s whole point when speaking of literature in terms of transformed memories interacting with the modified expectations that emerge from them.⁵⁷ Accordingly, Owen’s ironic hero obliges the reader to stand between a revised mythical discourse and a refined anticipation of what heroic virtue might consist of in future conflicts. This explains why it has been said, even of earlier heroic types like the romantic hero, that his enigmatic being is experienced through a hermeneutical distance.⁵⁸ Distance will inevitably grow between our normalized preconceptions of the hero and the renewed actuality of heroic action. Threatening to make the old heroic paradigm irrelevant and the actual world incomprehensible, this growing distance could only be covered with ever more sophisticated negotiations between memory and expectation, which become mutually transformative in the process. Ultimately, such a process accounts for the effective history of the hero, as well as the ability of a poem like “Disabled” to register the new complexity of trench warfare through the novel application of heroic rituals. Irony is an apt device in this regard. Intervening between what is mythically said and what should be additionally understood about the hero, irony effects, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, a “rubbing together” of “the said and the plural unsaid.”⁵⁹ The device of irony relies on similarities in order to expose incongruities, becoming complicitous in what it ultimately surpasses by alternative suggestion.⁶⁰ Instead of merely excluding archetypal heroic virtues, therefore, the ironic schema of “Disabled” includes them in a differential equation, an exercise in divergence. Here lies the reason why the mutilation of Owen’s soldier, as well as his defective knowledge and his ultimate seclusion, are significant: they are not the mutilation, ignorance, and seclusion of a common man, but of a would-be god. They are disfigurement, inferiority, and solitude inextricably interwoven with the age-old figure of a godlike youth, a virtual deity whose ritual has gone horribly wrong. They are the unexpected potentialities of a familiar archetype.

The situation of war could become “available for interpretation,” says Fussell, only because its “unprecedented meaning” found “precedent motifs and images” that could be adopted and adapted through novel application.⁶¹ This implies that the distance between precursory models and the extraliterary situation could only be bridged each time our narrated world regained the status of a meaningful experience, a singular extension of memory. In Owen’s poetry, this process of restoring experience to a narrated world is enhanced by the poet’s own habit of reacting to literary images, metaphors, and diction already established by earlier and contemporary writers. It has been amply demonstrated by Stallworthy that Owen’s poetic inventiveness was accomplished through repeated borrowings and ironic reworkings of rival literary and mythical images,⁶² implying that his work, at once derived and innovative, was frequently a negotiated distance between some dominant literary image and a projected otherness. When passed on to the reader, this play of receptive and creative faculties leads to another

⁵⁴ Bergonzi 36.

⁵⁵ Fussell 131.

⁵⁶ Fussell 61.

⁵⁷ Iser 111.

⁵⁸ Walter L. Reed, *Meditations on the Hero: A Study of the Romantic Hero in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974) 18.

⁵⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1995) 19.

⁶⁰ Hutcheon 23-27 *passim*.

⁶¹ Fussell 138-9.

⁶² Stallworthy 226-49 *passim*.

question, namely, whether there can ever be a final synthesis of the literary phenomenon. It is to this question that I turn in the final section of this study.

Is There a Final Synthesis of the War Hero?

Iser draws our attention to the reader's "wandering viewpoint," which "travels along *inside*" the literary phenomenon that the reader constructs out of various intersecting (and possibly conflicting) perspectives.⁶³ The first point made in this study – that poetry compresses multiple perspectives which then interact, put each other in relief, and demand that the literary object be significantly reconstructed – reveals the origin of the wandering viewpoint. In "Disabled," the reader's wandering viewpoint is first activated by a collision of aspects pertaining to the war victim. These loosened aspects then relate to each other through the alternative schema of irony. However, the wandering viewpoint does not end here, at the interplay between mythical residues and human limitations; it also brings about a process capable of questioning and reformulating itself through its "ever-expanding network of connections."⁶⁴ One of its features is that newly emerging gaps are inevitably brought to light with every effort towards a definitive synthesis between its disparate perspectives. Another is that in filling out these gaps with new combinations, the reader would also bring to light aspects that normally remain hidden in any directly perceived object, but that are now made the very focus of the sophisticated assembly of perspectives making the poetic image possible.⁶⁵ Accordingly, the poetic image of Owen's war victim always exists through assimilating new aspects demanded by the very need to bridge its intrinsically evolving gaps. This self-regulating process removes the distinction between the memory of the literary entity and its last projected aspect, its retained identity and its prospective being.

The foregoing process can be illustrated with a further gap made noticeable in the construction of Owen's war victim only now, that is, after the open-ended schema of his ironic being is well in place. This gap concerns the fact that, despite his highly individualized irony of divine manifestation blending with human fragility, Owen's soldier remains anonymous throughout the poem. The missing name of his exceptionally personal agony (his tragedy greatly individualizes myth, and his distressed voice can be heard through the narrating voice) stands out as the blank space that calls for further synthesis within the ironic schema, and thus as a need for further interpretation. Such a need may simply prolong the orientation of the ironic schema, by providing a further contrast with heroic virtues. In this case, the soldier's anonymity would simply feature as a contradiction to the heroic convention of accumulating various exploits under a famous name, which signifies a "unified and integral being."⁶⁶ As Gwyn Jones points out, "love of fame" in the traditional hero is not a crude vanity, but the very essential heroic trait of being recognized as an immortal identity.⁶⁷ As stated above, even the sacrificial death of the classical hero reinforces this immortalized identity, since it posthumously absorbs supernatural deeds from various cultures under a mythical or legendary name. Yet this classical ascendancy of the hero's immortalized name has already been subjected to ironic treatment in past literature. Bloomfield, for instance, discusses how in the Middle Ages the hero's good name becomes only one end of the "polarity between fame and conscience."⁶⁸ Inspired by Augustine's notion of *conscientia*, the Middle Ages became steadily more aware that "fame is the approval of men, whereas conscience is the approval of God," making the former subservient to the latter.⁶⁹ A new self-questioning conscience – one performing inner action for God in preference to outer action for men – thus led to a weakening of the hero's celebrated individuality, and an eventual splitting of heroic virtues "among several men."⁷⁰ Walter L. Reed likewise observes how the integrated identity of the later Romantic hero is split into the hero and his alter-ego, if not fragmented into a multiplicity of roles that destroy his "unifying power of personality."⁷¹

This literary history of a split heroic personality already implicates the hero as the inner struggle between the lure of fame and the prick of conscience, the making of a name and the breaking of identity. Owen's soldier is, in fact, shifted to the side of a troubled conscience, as illustrated by his inner torment about disability and seclusion. His obscurity within an institute goes further than being a direct result of his physical inability to

⁶³ Iser 109.

⁶⁴ Iser 116.

⁶⁵ Iser 137.

⁶⁶ Reed 28.

⁶⁷ Jones 48.

⁶⁸ Bloomfield 42.

⁶⁹ Bloomfield 43.

⁷⁰ Bloomfield 44.

⁷¹ Reed 29.

maintain athletic celebrity. It also represents a deeper schizophrenic nature: namely, a conscience doing battle with itself, and therefore unable to integrate its mythical aspirations and bodily mutilation under a single name. The soldier's anonymity can, in this respect, be treated as the outer sign of an inner failure of unity, a symbol of the contradictory components that allow no unifying name, let alone a celebrated personality, to emerge. Yet the blank space opened up by the soldier's anonymity also allows a more significant combination of perspectives to take place, thereby gaining a further impression of depth. This can be readily demonstrated with the following inversion: whereas the athlete's fame results from physically playing the game of football, his later obscurity results from the ironic play of mythical and human elements in the more serious game of warfare. The loss of the hero's unifying identity, his anonymity, thus exposes the tragic result of a misguided shift of the heroic game, its transfer from the athletic field to the battlefield. This transfer shatters the athlete's fame by separating the mythical and the human into irreconcilable elements, making their future connection possible only through the ironic game of an anonymous hero.

The notion of a heroic game is definitely not foreign to the poem "Disabled," which clearly evokes its image with terms like "ran," "hot race," "leap," "matches," "carried shoulder-high," and "football." Nevertheless, after the athletic hero conveys these play elements to the trenches, in accordance with the semiotic practice of the time, his athletic virtues mingle with mutilation ("the hot race / And leap of purple [blood that] spurted from his thigh"). As a result, athletic celebrity dissolves into obscurity, fame into seclusion. When the athletic components – racing and leaping – are relocated in a situation of bloodletting and sacrifice, the soldier seems closer than ever to a name of mythical stature, yet his resultant mutilation paradoxically eliminates the very possibility of a physically conducted game, let alone a celebrated or immortalized identity. The transposition of the heroic game to warfare, in fact, makes for a more serious game of mythical and human contrasts, the outcome of which is a nameless ironic hero. No longer able to be physically carried out, the heroic game henceforth depends on the reader's ironic shifts and interacting perspectives within the poetic event. For it is only the reader's engaged faculties that enable the heroic game to go on being skilfully executed, though as a literary performance leading to the agonizing realization of a nameless victim. Literature "conserves and recycles" products like the hero, says John Leyerle, by setting up their "structure of [...] play" as a pattern whose rules only the reader's further individual implementation can carry out.⁷² With reference to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the fourteenth-century romance full of play elements undertaken by its knight hero, Leyerle makes an important observation: what starts out to be a heroic game *within* the text in fact becomes a literary game, one in which symbols must be deciphered and action appropriately taken not only by the knight himself, but also by the very act of literary composition. Literary phenomena like Owen's ironic hero can reach unprecedented levels of performance because literary play replaces other less versatile and less far-reaching applications of the heroic game. This is why it can be said that the poem "Disabled" departs from a familiar heroic game towards an ever more sophisticated ironic fashion of playing it. The blank space opened up by the soldier's anonymity is, in fact, the site where a momentous performance of the heroic game can take place. While renouncing the mythical claims of immortal fame, this ironic play utilizes none other than the virtues of the immortal hero. It transforms the traditional hero's name, made immortal through ritual sacrifice, into the soldier's unknown name, made anonymous through the war's pointless sacrifice.

The last, concluding comment must therefore be that, rather than a final synthesis of Owen's disabled soldier, there is a memory of the hero's traditional components realized only through further performance, a belonging to the constituent narratives of the hero registered through significant potentialities discovered in his typical game. Owen's reader cannot stand outside the constraining framework of a recognizable world of heroism, if his interpretative moves are to make any difference, their significance to emerge against a familiar background. As stated above, the ironic performance of Owen's disabled soldier *stands out only through the novel way it stands within the narrated world of the hero*, which is to say that rather than dispense with the literary object or simply possess it as a fixed structure, the reader inhabits its pre-established game with outstanding and skilful adaptations that better satisfy his own experience of a lived world. The heroic game is thus broadened with literary possibilities first realized within its own boundaries, ensuring that the process never dissolves into a meaningless practice, and that each move remains an efficacious part of an evolving whole. In this way, the literary reader masters the very game whose structure had first constrained his moves, using techniques (such as irony) that extend it by revealing the hitherto unrealized possibilities of its tradition. In Owen's poem "Disabled," the significant becoming of the hero is just this skilful merging of the traditional rules of the heroic game and the ironic possibilities emerging in the act of playing it.

⁷² John Leyerle, "The Game and Play of Hero," eds. Norman T. Burns and Christopher J. Reagan 74-5.

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